

THESE, TOO, WERE UNSHACKLED

15 DRAMATIC STORIES FROM THE PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION

Adapted from the "Unshackled!" Radio Scripts by

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Chapter 4

My Husband, an Alcoholic - WILLIAM MORRISON

MY husband was an alcoholic. For years, I lived with a man who drank up the money that should have bought shoes and clothes for his children. I nursed his hangovers; I was embarrassed in public. I suffered through the bottle-hiding period. And I also suffered through the period of my own self-righteousness. The story of any alcoholic's wife is my story except that, through the power of JESUS CHRIST, it ends happily.

I met Bill Morrison in Scotland before we were twenty. "He's a vurra wild one, he is," my friends said, pointing out the broadshouldered lad who had just walked into the village dance with a look on his face that said no man would stop him from taking anything he wanted. I knew what I wanted. I wanted Bill Morrison to dance me around the dance floor until my feet left the ground and my head whirled. When he did, I knew I wouldn't forget this devil-may-care chap with the laugh that matched the strength of his arms. And I didn't forget him, although years later I used to lie awake nights wishing that I had.

It was only a short time after that he went off to America.

Going off to America was just the kind of adventuresome thing that Bill Morrison would do. I didn't know then that Bill's father, desperate over his son's wild ways, had the notion that a change of surroundings might be good for him. So he signed Bill up with a work gang bound for Canadian wheat harvests.

When Bill's letters started coming back to me from across the sea, I could hardly believe my good fortune. Soon his folks got a letter and I got another - both asking for the same thing. Bill said that there was only one present he really wanted for his nineteenth birthday. It was me, as his wife.

Afterwards, I wondered what his folks thought. They must have had their doubts when they put me on board the ship that was bound for Canada. I guess they hoped that my serious-minded level-headedness would settle Bill down. Perhaps they had the same confidence in love that I clung to for so many of the bad years. Very likely they thought that the ordinary discipline of living an orderly married life would change his ways.

In Canada, I settled down to living out my romantic dreams of married life with the laughing, daring, adventuring Scotsman. But quickly those dreams of a wide-eyed emigrant girl began to tarnish. There was the first night Bill came home drunk. All I could register was shock and disbelief.

"Bill, you're drunk!"

He bestowed on me one of his charm-the-devil-himself smiles, but it wobbled and fell apart into something grotesque. "A wee bit drunk, maybe. But it's nothing I won't get over. A man's got to relax a bit now and then."

I could only stand and stare at him helplessly. "I've never seen you like this before."

"There's a first time for everything, Nellie. Come here and give your hard-working husband a kiss to greet him at the end of the day."

"Is this the first time?" I demanded sharply.

"Maybe not the first," he said, leaning back against the door.

"But I'll promise you I'll never do it again."

I believed his promise that night. In fact, I told him that I had no intention of ever kissing a man with a breath like his. Then I went into the kitchen and began to cry.

But the promise was as worthless as rain-ruined hay. His drinking didn't interfere either with his job or with our bills, but it was a regular part of his life. "He's a vurra wild one, he is." I remembered my friend's words and for a long, long time I tried to excuse Bill, telling myself that his adventuresome, rebellious nature was both his strength and his weakness. It had driven him to seek his fortune in a strange land; it also drove him to the excitement he found in a bottle.

But sooner or later, I had to face the truth about Bill and about my problems with him. The night that our first baby was born, he was very drunk.

"A small celebration, Nell, my lass. After all, a man only becomes a father for the first time once!"

Being a father did not change my husband. He went on drinking. If celebration wasn't his excuse, then rebellion from responsibility was, even if he didn't admit it to me.

He was drunk again the night our third daughter was born.

I was not surprised. Weakly, that night, I tried to exact a promise from Bill.

"Bill, please, go to church with me from now on." "I never make a promise I can't keep," he said.

I couldn't let him forget all the promises he had not kept.

"I can remember the time when you promised you wouldn't drink again."

"Did I now?" he grinned down at me.

"I don't see how you can drink that stuff, Bill. It's terrible. I couldn't do it. It just wouldn't be possible for me to do it."

He looked down at me with something that was close to pure disdain, undistorted by the liquor. "I wouldn't be too sure about that, Nell," he said.

"What do you mean? I've never had a drink in my life!"

"Then if I were you, I wouldn't be bragging about it. I'd be thanking GOD. I wouldn't be bragging."

With that conversation there came a subtle change in our relationship. There is nothing more difficult to live with than a self-righteous woman. I know that now. But I did not know it during those terrible days of Bill's struggle with alcohol. I saw only what Bill's drinking was doing to our home, our children. It was true that I did not drink; I was the wounded one. I was the moral one. And so I placed myself on a kind of pedestal of good conduct and expected Bill to look up to me if he wanted to approach me at all.

This was probably the worst and most unwise thing I could have done. Bill found no help at all in me. I was only something to rebel against. I should have sensed this from glimpses he had given me of his boyhood, the experiences that had turned him into the handsome wild one who snatched me up on a village dance floor.

Bill had actually developed a taste for smoky-flavored Scots whiskey when he was just nine years old. That curiosity of his had started him. His home was not a drinking home, but his father was a saloon keeper. Whiskey was delivered to his father at full proof. Then he cut it down with water to the legal strength for public sale. It was Bill's job to carry the water, and he took to sipping a little whenever his father's back was turned. I guess that's how it all started. But I always had the feeling that it might have gone away as his boyish curiosity was satisfied except for something that happened to make his drinking a matter of personal rebellion against authority.

It seems that he took to hiding bottles of beer and whisky in his bedroom and sampling them when he was alone. One day his mother gave the room an extra thorough cleaning and she found the bottles! She said nothing to Bill. But that night, when he raced his brothers into the dining room, he came face to face with the ugly evidence that he had been found out. There, tall and accusing before his place at the table, stood a big beer bottle and a big whiskey bottle. In a second, he realized they had come from his room.

Nothing was said. The bottles spoke for themselves. And they stood there, shouting their accusation all through that meal. It must have been agony for Bill. The way he told me, his brothers around the table made no comment. But their sly looks were a cruel punishment, which, of course, was exactly what his mother had intended.

At the end of the meal, his mother spoke her piece. "Now, then. There'll na mair of this drinkin' the whiskey and beer. We'll be havin' nae drunkards in the hoose. Ye're nought but a wee lad, bottle or no bottle. And if ye dinna learn yer lesson the no, I'll find an ither way to break ye!"

Humiliated before his brothers, forced to remain silent, but seething, Bill knew in that moment the terrible urge to rebel. And he never lost it. It was this rebellion that had pushed him across the sea, and it was this rebellion that made him drink. So it was only natural that the more self-righteous I became, the more I compared my conduct with his, the more Bill rebelled. And the more he rebelled, the more he drank. And the more he drank, the more I preached and nagged. So our situation deteriorated. Bills piled up. Pay checks were cashed secretly and squandered on liquor.

I took on myself the responsibility of maintaining our home. I located a job with a local day nursery. The pay would at least feed and clothe our five youngsters. There was almost nothing at all left between Bill and me - except my fast-fading memory of the bluff, handsome Scotsman with the charming grin who had spirited me away from my homeland by promising me half the new world. There was still some love left, enough to keep alive my determination to reform the man.

I used to beg him to come to church with me. Sometimes he did. But usually he had been drinking. Sober, he hated anything about churches. And Bill Morrison, half-drunk inside a church sanctuary, was an embarrassment I would like to forget.

Bill Morrison was a man on the way down - as a man, as a husband, and as a father. But he wasn't all the way down. Every now and then he would manage to bring together all his remaining will power and make a valiant attempt at a fresh start. Each time I hoped - and prayed. But each time, the fresh start was a step on the ladder preceding a tumble that knocked him down five steps.

Once he bought a ranch, the Lazy M. He loved horses and life outdoors, and the ranch might have succeeded. But without any boss except himself - and me, of course - Bill had no reins on his drinking at all hours of the day. But even without a boss, he continued to try to fool everybody about his drinking - himself, and especially me.

He went through the pathetic motions of hiding bottles in the stable hay. His hired man bought them and sneaked them into the stable, and Bill would tuck them away cozily for future use. One day I caught him patting the hay into place over its little secret. He jumped when he saw me in the stable doorway and then he shrugged. "So you've caught me, Nell. Now you can start laying down the law, I suppose."

But I was in no mood to lay down any law. My nagging was powerless. I knew it now. Our fifth baby had just been born. We had come to the end of the road. I had been reaching this conclusion for a long time - it was shaped partly by my own despair and partly by what insight I had gained from my church. I knew that the first thing to change in this whole situation was me and my attitude, and I knew too that I could only do that in the strength of GOD.

I tried to tell Bill about it. I knew that words would only tell him so much - I would have to act out the rest.

"I'm not going to lay down the law, Bill. I've changed. I'm not any better than you are."

He looked at me as if he expected sarcasm. "What do you mean? You've been taking nips on the side, old girl?"

I shook my head. "That's not what I mean. Bill, I've met GOD in a new way, and now I know CHRIST personally. I don't have to be down on you and pester you, Bill. Now all I have to do is turn you over to CHRIST and trust Him for the outcome."

Bill sat back on his heels and scratched his head.

"I'm not going to nag you to go to church with me anymore."

"You're not . . .?"

"That's going to be between GOD and you. I can't change you myself, Bill. But I can love you and trust Him."

Those were hard words to say. But they came from an entirely new point of view toward myself and toward Bill and his drinking. They were even harder to live up to. But I was convinced that help would come only from GOD, in some way, and not through my self-righteousness or determination.

Oddly, after that Bill seemed to get worse. He lost the Lazy M ranch and his riding school. He got so far down that he was drinking rubbing alcohol. Poisoned by it, his eyesight began to fail. But I stuck with him, and somehow our family stayed together.

During those terrible years, Bill went to church with me time and time again. I never begged him. But when he said he wanted to go, I didn't refuse him, even though he was often so drunk that he'd stop the service. Later, he would be stricken with remorse. But he went on drinking.

Out of these years there developed within me a mature faith in JESUS CHRIST and a profound respect for His Church. My pastor's patience with this - drunk - who would call him up in a spell of guilt to ask his permission to come back to church again was an example that inspired me and sent me back to pray for more patience with Bill.

And yet, I had almost nothing tangible to give me hope.

Bill's conversations with the pastor at the church, for instance, always seemed to end the same way.

"Of course you're good enough to come to church, Bill," I heard him tell my almost-sober husband. "Haven't you heard that JESUS came to call sinners to repentance - and that means all of us!"

"It means me. That I know." Bill would grin. "Meant me, too. All of us."

Bill would shake his head. "Not my wife."

"Oh yes it does. And now she has faith in the new life that CHRIST will put in you - when you're ready."

Bill would think it over. "Me?" he'd asked slowly.

The pastor would put his hand on Bill's arm. "Would you like to go into my study and talk it over? Let GOD give you a new life?"

Then Bill would draw away. His grin would fade. "No. I'm not ready. Not yet."

But the pastor was always patient. "When you are, Scotty, remember you can call me any time - day or night. Don't forget it."

That man never lost his patience. He'd stop at the house and find Bill hanging around, drunk and mean. It was on one of those days that he told Bill about a new radio program called Unshackled.

So Bill began to listen to Unshackled.

It became part of his regular routine. Drunk or sober, he listened to the story of the Mission on Chicago's Skid Row. I used to listen too, expecting that any minute he'd snap off the story in boredom or rebellion or just plain guilt. But week after week he listened, and after the program he would usually sit in his chair, not saying much. If he was drinking that day, he'd keep right on. But even with a bottle in his hand, he'd sit there and it was easy to see that he was mulling over what he had heard.

But nothing changed. I went on working. Bill went on drinking. I didn't leave him. He didn't leave us - for Skid Row. Then one night I was making myself a solitary comforting cup of tea in the kitchen and Bill, alone in the bedroom, and very drunk, was listening to the radio.

I heard the announcer's words, *"If the voice of the Lord has broken through to you, won't you make this a time of turning once and for all to follow the CHRIST who rose from the tomb and who will abide with you forever, if you'll but open the door? The Lord JESUS CHRIST can break the pattern of your old trouble-laden life and give you a new life. **'Believe on the Lord JESUS CHRIST and thou shalt be saved.'**"*

Then I heard Bill. "Oh GOD!" he sobbed.

In a minute, he staggered heavily from the bedroom and went straight to the phone. Shakily, he dialed. "Preacher? Listen. This is Scotty. I was listening to the program. I'm ready. Can I come over to see you - right now?" The receiver crashed down. "I mean it, Nell. I'm gonna drive over there right now. I mean it this time. Are you coming with me?"

Was I coming with him? He was too drunk to stand. But he was asking me to let him drive us both across town. Was I coming with him? I had come all the way across the sea for this Scotsman; I had come into a new relationship with myself and my GOD out of my agonized

marriage with him; and I had come through many a desperate day. I knew that I would take this last trip with Bill Morrison. Somehow, we crossed town in our pick-up truck.

That night Bill and the pastor knelt together and my husband became a new creature in CHRIST.

That night he found his way to GOD, who had called him through the radio program Unshackled.

So the nightmare of my life with an alcoholic husband came to an end. It was a dramatic, immediate conclusion. And anyone who has lived through this kind of personal torment would agree with me that it was truly a miraculous ending.

I watched the miracle of Bill Morrison finding sobriety and staying with it and I know beyond any doubt that it happened because of JESUS CHRIST and my husband's faith in His power.

From the moment Bill rose from his knees that night, life was different. Of course, we couldn't go back twenty years. Bill and I were no longer the black-haired daredevil of the Scottish moors and the blonde, wide-eyed village maid. But Bill's laugh was still hearty, and his new Christianity hadn't changed his adventuring soul at all. It had just channeled his curiosity and his drive. So he plunged into his new life with the same kind of abandon that had played havoc with his old.

But now things were different. We sold our store, bought a little truck and motion picture projector, and began touring Canada, showing *The Street*, the movie produced by the Pacific Garden Mission to tell the story of that Skid Row mission and CHRIST's power to save.

All over Canada, we went - without much money, living by faith.

So this is the story of a woman married to an alcoholic who was unshackled by JESUS CHRIST.

I have known the bitterness and the self-righteousness and the guilt of any other woman married to an alcoholic. But today my husband is saved and busy winning others for CHRIST. My story does indeed have a happy ending.

~ end of chapter 4 ~
